

III.

SHORT SKETCHES OF THE GROWTH OF NATURE-
POETRY FROM THE TIME OF POPE.

THE next step in our short notes on the Nature Poets brings us to the works of Crabbe and Cowper. Great advances were made by these two towards the loving and minutely accurate word-treatment of Nature, which has enriched the treasure-hoard of our English tongue with such gems as those left us in this century by Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson.

Crabbe was both a botanist, geologist, and mineralogist, and, after the death of his wife, he spent much of his time seeking for specimens in the quarries near his parish of Trowbridge. He was a keen and minute observer of Nature, and hence we find delightful descriptions of stones and flowers in his poems, though these latter deal mostly with the annals of life in a country parish, as might be expected from the titles of two of his best works — *The Parish Register* and *The Borough*.

On the monument to his memory in the chancel of his church at Trowbridge, it is recorded that he entered "into the sorrows and privations of the poorest of his parishioners . . . and as a writer he is well described by a great contemporary as 'Nature's sternest painter, yet her best.'" He dearly loved the sea, and would ride 60 miles in 24 hours (this sounds nothing in these cycling days, but the means of locomotion were very different then,) to catch a glimpse of it. Speaking of Crabbe's graphic descriptions Howitt, in his *Homes and Haunts of the British Poets*, says: "Every feature of the whole line of coast from Orford to Dunwich has, somewhere or other, been reproduced in his writings. The quay of Slaughden in particular has been painted with all the minuteness of a Dutch landscape.

'Here samphire banks and saltwort bound the flood,
There stakes and seaweed withering in the mud,
And higher up a ridge of all things base,
Which some strong tide has roll'd upon the place.'

He paints the very blade of grass on the common and the trail of shell-fish on the sand." Yet, though Crabbe was almost a pre-Raphaelite in his care for the minute, he lacked the imagination which has made our later poets believe "all Nature alive and conceive a living spirit in the sand, the daisy, and the vapour."

Thus, then, we find ourselves in a Transition Period, when the poets are rapidly ceasing to look on Nature as a mere ornamental background for the study of mankind, but are rather seeking to study and love her for her own sake.

In our next poet — Cowper — we have a man whose love for Nature takes a higher flight. Extremely sensitive, nervous, and retiring, an elegant scholar, and a man of the most refined tastes, he has left us the fruits of a calm, meditative, and deeply-religious life spent in the heart of the country he so dearly loved, and away from the sights and sounds of a town. We have in his biographies pleasant pictures of the little Bedfordshire village of Olney, where he spent much of his life. It has been suggested, and with good reason, that environment and ancestry have much to answer for in the *style* of a poet, hence the great difference between Celtic and English poetry — but this thought will be again dwelt upon in connection with Burns.

It is mentioned here in reference to Cowper because, in spite of many beautiful and inspiring passages, there seems to be lacking that *fervour of enthusiasm* which "will bring a rock, a tree, a glade, with one magical touch into the region of Fairy-land."

In Cowper's home at Olney there were no grand hills, but mere stretches of green pasture and corn-land reaching to the limits of the horizon; through the clusters of cottages ran one street with here and there a poplar rearing its upright form to break the monotony of the scene, while the sleepy Ouse wound slowly on with all its reeds and rushes, in summer the white and golden water lilies gazing from its placid bosom into the sunny sky. Not far away were the quiet woods where he loved to roam at will and meditate, and there, as he tells us in his *Winter Walk at Noon*,

"I tread
The walk still verdant, under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches over-arch the glade."

Much of Cowper's poetry is connected with the politics of his day, and these must be studied before his *Poetry of Man* can be thoroughly understood. The Nature-touches come in here and

there, but more especially in *The Garden*, *The Winter Morning's Walk*, and *The Winter Walk at Noon*. Gazing upon the woodland, he exclaims :

"Man
Smit with the beauty of so fair a scene
Might well suppose the Artificer Divine
Meant it Eternal, had not He Himself
Pronounced it transient, glorious as it is !"

In all around Cowper finds fresh inspiration to draw his thoughts God-ward, and as we read :

"The soul that sees Him . . .
Discerns in all things
A ray of heavenly light gilding all forms
Terrestrial, in the vast and the minute
The unambiguous footsteps of the God
Who gives its lustre to the insect's wing,
And wheels His Throne upon the rolling winds ;"

our thoughts go back to the exclamation of the Psalmist of old as he recounts the wonders of the Creator : "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works, in wisdom hast Thou made them all, the earth is full of Thy riches !"

Space forbids the quotation of many of his Nature-passages, but those who are interested in the subject will find a special beauty in the lines from *The Winter's Walk at Noon*, beginning

"What prodigies can power divine perform,"

with their sweet descriptions of the laburnum, syringa "ivory pure," the guelder-rose with "her silver globes light as the foamy surf that the wind severs from the broken wave," the lilac, woodbine, Hypericum (S. John's wort) "all bloom," the Althea (mallow) "with purple eye ;" the broom with "blossoms bright as bullion unalloy'd," and the jasmine —

"The deep green of whose unvarnished leaf
Makes more conspicuous, and illumines more
The bright profusion of her scattered stars."

The subject for the next paper will be the Nature-poetry of Burns, and I will close this one with the following extract, which helps us to realise the exact place among our English Nature-Poets held by Cowper :—

"When they (Crabbe and Cowper) looked at natural things from the Poet's point of feeling they saw their beauty as the result of this order, and referred the whole to God who directed it from

without. Nature was a machine which God had set in motion, but it moved without any living consciousness of its own motion. The last step, therefore, in the poetic theology of Nature had not then been made. The Poets had not reached the stage in which they were forced, not only by their own feelings, but also by the needs of their art, to conceive of the universe beyond themselves as living.

"Crabbe made no advance towards it ; his was the mechanical theory of God and the universe. But Cowper, though he held the same theory for the most part, made one step towards the higher view, and he made it through his religion. His intense personality forced him, when under poetic emotion, to lay aside the mechanical theory, and we find passages where he ceases to interpose laws between Nature and God. He transferred from his theological creed the doctrine of the personal superintendence of God over every human life to the realm of Nature, and bringing God directly into contact with it, declared that He maintained its course by an unremitting act. How else could matter seem as if it were alive,—

'unless impelled
To ceaseless service by a ceaseless force,
And under pressure of some conscious cause.
The Lord of all, Himself through all diffused,
Sustains and is the Life of all that lives —
Nature is but the name of an effect
Whose cause is God.'

"But his personal theology, which abode in worship of Christ, carried him still further ; and he makes Christ Himself as the Eternal Word, as the acting Thought of God—the ruler of the universe, and the author of its forms.

'One spirit, His
Who wore the plaited thorns with bleeding brows,
Rules universal Nature — not a flower
But shows some touch in freckle, streak, or stain,
Of His unrivalled pencil. He inspires
Their balmy odours, and imparts their hues,
And bathes their eyes with nectar, and includes
In grains as countless as the seaside sands
The forms with which He sprinkles all the earth.'"

(From Rev. Stopford Brooke's *Theology in the English Poets*).

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